

# SAOA Historical Series No 37

Erhard Franz Boehm (1911-1994) 'An extraordinary amateur ornithologist'

## Part 10

I have left waterbirds till the last and have divided Boehm's records into two areas, as he noted waterbirds on the Mount Mary Plains, but also recorded them along the Murray River, most often around Morgan. I will deal with the Mount Mary Plains birds first. Boehm (1953b) provides some interesting insights into the area's attraction for waterbirds so I have summarized this here. The Plains receive less than 10 inches of rain per year and have no permanent large areas of surface water. West of the Murray are depressions that hold water after heavy rain. One notable depression is Craigie's Plain, which receives floodwater from Levi's Creek and other watercourses connecting with creeks from the Mt Lofty Ranges. After heavy rains in January 1941, this lagoon had a circumference of 10 miles and on two other occasions has been more than half that size.

### WATERBIRDS ON THE MOUNT MARY PLAINS

Boehm (1953b) reports singles and pairs of **Australasian Grebe** on dams occasionally. One nest was on a dam near Mount Mary in 1946 and there were small flocks at Craigie's Plain. A record from the notebooks was of a pair with several immatures on the effluent ponds at Eudunda on 2<sup>nd</sup> May 1979. **Hoary-headed Grebes** occurred similarly to Australasian Grebes (Boehm 1953b).

Four species of cormorants were recorded on the Mount Mary Plains, with the most common being the **Little Pied Cormorant**. This species was first observed when two were secured at the homestead near Sutherlands in August 1932 (Boehm 1934). Individuals of both the Little Pied and **Little Black Cormorants** sometimes settled on dams for several days if not disturbed (Boehm 1953b). **Pied Cormorants** were occasionally observed singly or in pairs at dams and on lagoons, while the rarest of the four, the **Great Cormorant**, was only seen singly (Boehm 1953b).

Quite large flocks of **Australian Pelicans** sometimes appeared over the Mount Mary Plains, generally moving westwards towards the Mt Lofty Ranges from the direction of the River Murray. Only rarely did a pelican land on a farm dam for a short time, as at Erdora on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1978. There were several at Craigie's Plain in 1941, and a flock of about 50 circled near Sutherlands on 6/6/53 (Boehm 1953b). These birds were at a height of 500 feet when first seen, but spiraled to about 1000 feet before moving westwards. On 14<sup>th</sup> August 1976, 20 pelicans flew over two empty dams 5km SE of Sutherlands.

Boehm reported only one individual of the **Cape Barren Goose**, a bird that appeared on the Salt Creek near a pig paddock close to the homestead of Mr P.H.Schiller, 3 miles south of Sutherlands (Boehm 1952b). The bird

remained for about a fortnight in mid-December 1951, feeding on grain put out for the pigs and bathing in pools in the creek.

**Black Swans** were seen flocking at lagoons and rarely on dams. The earliest report is of six birds on the Government Dam in 1927 (Boehm 1928). Occasionally a large flock would move westwards from the River Murray in the direction of the Mt Lofty Ranges, with one such flock on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1958 estimated to include 250 individuals. The spearhead of the flock was in "V" formation with the others strung out in two long lines, occasionally forming a single long line of birds. At the rear was a group of birds which flew in "V" formation but ultimately separated from the main body of the flock to form another flock. A flock of about 60 birds in a "V" formation flew SW on 29<sup>th</sup> October 1976, 1km SE of Sutherlands.

The description of **Australian Wood Duck** as "very rarely seen", usually in pairs, (1953b), is borne out by the paucity of records in the notebooks. Two were on a dam east of Sutherlands on 30<sup>th</sup> November 1945, a pair with about five ducklings were at a dam 3 miles west of Bower on 15<sup>th</sup> September 1963, a pair were at Erdora dam in early August 1974 (ten were there in November 1974) and a lone male flew from eremophila bushes, 3 km east of Sutherlands on 27<sup>th</sup> March 1978. There was no surface water anywhere in the vicinity of this last sighting.

A new locality record was seven **Chestnut-breasted Shelducks** on a dam 5 km south of Sutherlands on 14<sup>th</sup> January 1978, reported to Boehm by W.G. Heidrich and sons. Another rare duck was the **Hardhead**, with the first record being two males on the effluent ponds at Eudunda on 12<sup>th</sup> June 1979, with a follow-up record of a pair on the ponds on 16<sup>th</sup> July 1979 and six birds on 23<sup>rd</sup> July 1979. Almost as rare was the **Pink-eared Duck**, with Boehm (1928) reporting only one bird – a dead specimen – and Boehm (1953b) rating them as very rare visitors and only seen singly. The notebooks provide two records – one bird at Erdora dam on 13<sup>th</sup> September 1951 in company with four Grey Teal, and two birds at the same dam on 28<sup>th</sup> June 1978 with one Grey Teal. There is one skin in the SA Museum from Sutherlands from 2/6/58. The only record of the Blue-winged Shoveler (now **Australasian Shoveler**) was a bird that was injured and later died, apparently as a result of colliding with telephone wires at Sutherlands in April 1944 (Boehm 1953b).

**Plumed Tree-Ducks** are usually confined to the north-east of the state, but on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1955, eight were on Erdora dam and three specimens were secured for the SA Museum (Boehm 1956c). At night the whistling note was heard over the homestead. Another rarity was the **Musk**

**Duck**, with the first sighting a single bird on the Eudunda effluent ponds by L.C. Heinicke on 8<sup>th</sup> July 1978. Erhard confirmed that this was a male Musk Duck on 11<sup>th</sup> July. On 6<sup>th</sup> August 1979 Boehm reported in his notebook that he thought there was a **Blue-billed Duck** on the effluent ponds, but he later decided that it was possibly a Hardhead.

Boehm (1953b) reported **Pacific Black Ducks** occurring mostly in pairs at dams and as small flocks at lagoons. The only other record I can find is of six birds on a dam on 3<sup>rd</sup> October 1932 (Boehm 1934). The **Grey Teal** was the most commonly seen duck, with flocks of several hundred at Craigie's Plain (Boehm 1953b). Occasionally they settle down for some weeks at large dams and breed; for example a pair with 8 ducklings was on Government Dam in March 1947. One specimen is in the SA Museum from Sutherlands, dated 22/10/36.

Ibis were rarely reported on the Mount Mary Plains and I can find only one record of the **Australian White Ibis**, described as a new locality record. The notebooks report a lone bird, apparently an immature from its feathered neck, flying over the homestead on 29<sup>th</sup> April 1975 during light drizzling rain. There are two records of the **Straw-necked Ibis** – one bird at a homestead dam of H.O. Noack of Sutherlands on 16<sup>th</sup> September 1963 and one flying low over Erdora after sunset in drizzling rain on 15<sup>th</sup> October 1972.

Spoonbills were rarely recorded on the Mount Mary Plains. A new locality record was three immature **Royal Spoonbills** on the Erdora homestead dam on 4<sup>th</sup> November 1953 (description: bills were pale-greenish flesh colour above and paler below; the tarsus in all three was greenish-black from toes to knees behind and greenish-horn in front of tarsi). The birds were tame and could be approached to within 20 yards. Boehm (1928) reported one **Yellow-billed Spoonbill** on the Government Dam, Sutherlands, and I can find no later records.

The **Great Egret** was described as "rarely seen; always singly" (Boehm 1953b) and this is borne out by the notebooks. There are two records only – one on the homestead dam for a week, together with a White-necked and a White-faced heron on 13<sup>th</sup> October 1951, and one on the same dam on 5<sup>th</sup> -6<sup>th</sup> June 1978. Described by Boehm (1953b) as the most familiar waterbird and called 'Blue Crane', the **White-faced Heron** was occasionally seen on dams and bred along the Salt Creek. A nest containing four eggs was in a mallee overhanging Deep Creek, 3km south of Sutherlands on 24<sup>th</sup> September 1978, with an adult in attendance. Less frequently recorded at farm dams and lagoons was the **White-necked Heron**, although there was an influx in the spring of 1951 which coincided with a drought in central Australia (Boehm 1953b). Lone birds or pairs were reported on the homestead dam in October 1951, March 1952 and September 1976 and three were among Geijera shrubs near Sutherlands on 9<sup>th</sup> December 1975, despite a lack of surface water. The only record of a **Nankeen Night-Heron** was a solitary bird seen in a very good season by Erhard's father, Johannes. The bird flushed from thick

mallee foliage close to an underground tank on 2<sup>nd</sup> November 1937 (Boehm 1953b).

Some confusion surrounds Erhard's only record of the **Buff-banded Rail**. In his notebook he describes a juvenile bird, with remiges too short for flight and the buff chest-band discernible, captured by a cat at R. Leditschke's homestead near Point Pass on 22<sup>nd</sup> November 1978. The bird's identity was confirmed by Erhard and the bird was released into a reed-lined creek nearby. In his summary notebook he surmises that the bird was likely to have come from the Robertstown Lagoon several kilometres away. Likewise I can only find one record in the notebooks of the **Australian Spotted Crake**, concerning a bird on the Erdora dam on 4<sup>th</sup> January 1973, which Boehm noted was a new locality record.

The **Eurasian Coot** also appears to have been a rare visitor to the Mount Mary Plains, with Boehm (1953b) reporting several on Craigie's Plain lagoon in 1941. A bird with an injured wing was on the Erdora dam on 21<sup>st</sup> January 1979, but Boehm noted that they were not usually seen on dams. As is typical with the **Black-tailed Native-hen**, they are sometimes in small numbers but can occasionally be very numerous, as they were in 1922, when several hundred birds were about (Boehm 1928). In the early 1920s they bred near Sutherlands (Boehm 1953b). While they were destructive of young cereal crops, Erhard noted that they also consumed grasshopper swarms. One or two birds were at Erdora in May 1952, October 1953, August-September 1964 and May 1975, causing damage to seedling vegetables on occasion. Larger flocks included 100+ at the Eudunda effluent ponds in July 1972 and June 1975 and 1000 birds there after mid-July 1975. A skin from Sutherlands from 25/8/32 is in the SA Museum.

**Black-winged Stilts** were infrequent visitors to farm dams, either singly or in pairs, and were seen occasionally at temporary lagoons on the Mount Mary Plains, including Craigie's Plain (Boehm 1953b). Boehm (1962c) described the juvenile plumage of this species which differed from the immature birds described in texts. A specimen in the SA Museum is from Craigie's Plain (21/10/41). Similar comments about abundance were made about the **Red-necked Avocet**; however Erhard believed the species bred on the Plains. A flock of 20 birds was at Craigie's Plain in 1941-42 and a bird appeared to be sitting on a scrape on a small island there in October 1942 (Boehm 1953b). Also several birds at a lagoon south of Mt Mary gave a diversionary display on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1955. There is a skin in the SA Museum from Eba from 16/6/58. The only record of a **Banded Stilt** that I can locate is of an adult male dead near power lines 2km SW of Hampden (which is just northwest of Eudunda) on 31<sup>st</sup> May 1978, found by Frank Waithe.

The only record of **Grey Plover** from the Mount Mary Plains was a single bird feeding with Banded Lapwings on limestone-strewn pasture close to Erdora homestead on 27<sup>th</sup> November 1957. It was collected for the SA Museum and was a female. **Red-capped Plovers** occurred in small flocks or pairs at the large lagoons formed after very

heavy rains. This species was thought to have bred at Craigie's Plain in 1941 (Boehm 1953b). Two specimens in the Museum are from Craigie's Plain (2/10/42) and Mt Mary (31/8/63).

The **Black-fronted Dotterel** is more likely to appear at farm dams and the smaller more isolated lagoons than the previous species and is the common dotterel of the region (Boehm 1964b). The species is always present along Salt Creek and breeds there (Boehm 1953b). Two specimens from the Plains are in the SA Museum, one from Sutherlands (19/8/30) and one from Mt Mary (26/9/63).

Boehm (1964b) reports that the **Red-kneed Dotterel** moves about considerably after heavy rains inland. They sometimes appear at farm dams on the Mount Mary Plains, particularly after rains have filled them to overflowing, and also appear at temporary lagoons, like Craigie's Plain in 1941-42. An immature bird was there and another was on the homestead dam on 25<sup>th</sup> February 1969, lacking the black chest band and black on the head. Boehm (1950) describes this species swimming at Craigie's Plain lagoon in 1941. Two specimens are in the SA Museum, one from Craigie's Plain (2/10/42) and one from Mt Mary (18/9/63).

**Oriental Dotterels** are rarely recorded in southern Australia but two birds were mistnetted by Boehm in a nearly empty dam during a severe heat wave at Erdora on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1968 (Boehm 1974b). The birds were released after being banded, weighed and photographed.

**Masked Lapwings** appear to have been quite rare on the Mount Mary Plains, with pairs at lagoons at Mount Mary and Craigie's Plain (Boehm 1953b). The notebooks mention three birds east of Eudunda in May 1956 and a pair was on various dams from 1959 to 1962 near Sutherlands. Described as common and breeding in each year (Boehm 1928), there are many reports in the notebooks of **Banded Lapwings** from the 1950s and 1960s, including breeding records. Eggs were recorded as early as 17<sup>th</sup> July (in 1963) and a brood hatched in October in 1957. In the Mount Mary district nests have the depression lined with small limestones and pieces of cattle, horse or sheep dung (Boehm 1964b). In nests under observation, eggs disappeared before hatching and at least on one occasion Erhard suspected ravens were the culprits. Boehm (1955c) reports on this species' habit of bathing and feeding in water. Two birds were bathing in the homestead dam on 1<sup>st</sup> July 1955 (and one bird behaving similarly on 17<sup>th</sup> July 1963) and, at Robertstown Lagoon on 12<sup>th</sup> July 1955, several were wading in shallow water, apparently feeding. And then on 28<sup>th</sup> August 1955 several pairs were wading and feeding in shallow water in Craigie's Plain lagoon. Thirty birds were in a flock in a watercourse covered with short grass in November 1960 and Erhard remarked on their absence from the Sutherlands/Bower area during spring and summer 1974-75, due to the high dense grass and bassia on almost all properties. At the end of December 1976 they were back, as a flock of 20 was seen near Sutherlands. The SA Museum contains a clutch of four eggs from east of Sutherlands from 29/4/51.

There is only one record from Boehm of the **Australian Painted Snipe** and that is of a female at Erdora on 4<sup>th</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> March 1969. The notebook states: "It was extremely wary and would fly away when approached to within about 50 yards. The bird had chestnut on the hind neck and the whole head was dark in colour, appearing almost black at a distance. In flight it seemed to have a white band around the neck. The upper parts were dark grey and the abdomen was white. The fine mottling and barring could not be seen in the field. When wading in shallow water in the dam, its bill appeared yellow and fairly long. Its occurrence constituted a new locality record."

Boehm (1953b) reports flocks of between ten and twelve **Sharp-tailed Sandpipers** at lagoons and smaller ones at dams. A lone and lame bird was at Erdora dam on 26<sup>th</sup> October 1951 and two birds were secured on a small temporary lagoon in pastoral country south-west of Morgan on 8<sup>th</sup> March 1958. There are also other specimens in the SA Museum, from Craigie's Plain, Sutherlands and Robertstown between 1937 and 1963. The only record I can find of a **Curlew Sandpiper** on the Plains was a single bird at a lagoon 6.5 miles SSW of Mt Mary on 18<sup>th</sup> September 1963. Although there are no records in the notebooks of **Red-necked Stint**, there is a specimen in the SA Museum from Robertstown from 13/12/63.

There are a few records of **Australian Pratincoles** in the notebooks; e.g. 4 at Zerner's Lagoon, south of Mt Mary in September 1963, 2-4 at Erdora in October 1963, and 10-20 at Robertstown Lagoon from 12/63 to 1/64. Boehm (1964b) says that invasions into southern parts of the state appear to be taking place more frequently, with breeding occurring within a few miles of Adelaide. He reports on five to seven birds feeding in a fallow paddock at Sutherlands in November 1960 on small plague grasshoppers *Austroicetes cruciata*. Erhard did not ever record pratincoles drinking.

There appear to be only two records of **Caspian Tern** on the Mount Mary Plains. The first was several birds at Craigie's Plain during 1941-42 (Boehm 1953b) and the other from the notebooks was of two birds flying over Erdora on 7<sup>th</sup> September 1965 in dull drizzly weather. The first record of a **Whiskered Tern** was of two birds skimming and hovering over a dam near Sutherlands on 3<sup>rd</sup> January 1931 (Boehm 1934). The birds were later collected and are still in the SA Museum (although date given there is 23/1/31). Boehm (1953b) notes that the species is very rarely seen, either singly or in pairs. The only record in the notebooks is of a bird in non-breeding plumage along the Light River at the Hansborough Bridge, SW of Eudunda on 7/12/78. There is a record of a **Roseate Tern** (the 2<sup>nd</sup> record for the state at the time) first seen by Miss Thiele near Sutherlands in June 1928 (Boehm 1928). The bird was later found dead and identified by the SA Museum.

**Silver Gulls** were occasionally seen, usually singly, at dams and mostly after rough showery weather, with small flocks at Craigie's Plain lagoon (Boehm 1953b). An adult was at Erdora in May 1953 in the yard with Domestic Pigeons and an immature bird was there in January 1956.

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Twelve birds were at Eudunda effluent ponds on 21<sup>st</sup> July 1978 and one bird was in Eudunda township on 11<sup>th</sup> August 1953. A single specimen is in the SA Museum, collected at Sutherlands on 22/7/31.

#### **WATERBIRDS ALONG THE RIVER MURRAY**

In the interests of space I am simply listing the species of waterbirds that Boehm recorded at or near Morgan along the River Murray, with detailed notes on any more unusual sightings:

Musk Duck, Black Swan, Australian Shelduck, Australian Wood Duck, Pink-eared Duck, Australasian Shoveler, Grey Teal, Pacific Black Duck, Hardhead, Australasian Grebe, Hoary-headed Grebe, Great Crested Grebe, Australasian Darter, Little Pied Cormorant, Great Cormorant, Little Black Cormorant, Pied Cormorant, Australian Pelican, White-necked Heron, (Eastern) Great Egret, White-faced Heron, Nankeen Night-Heron, Australian White Ibis, Straw-necked Ibis, Royal Spoonbill, Yellow-billed Spoonbill, Red-necked Avocet, Black-fronted Dotterel, Banded Lapwing, Masked Lapwing, Common Greenshank, Marsh Sandpiper, Red-necked Stint, Sharp-tailed Sandpiper, Australian Pratincole, Caspian Tern, Whiskered Tern, Crested Tern and Silver Gull.

In Notebook 3 Boehm records an uncertain sighting of **Wandering Whistling-Duck** (*Dendrocygna arcuata*). There was one bird at the lagoon east of Morgan on 7<sup>th</sup> March 1954 and also on 15<sup>th</sup> November 1953. He describes the bill as seeming pale-coloured, but thought this may have been an optical illusion in bright sunlight, the pale chin looking like the bill. Erhard never published this record so he was obviously not sure of the bird's identity and the pale bill suggests the Plumed Whistling-Duck.

Other records that he did not publish were his sightings of what he thought were **Intermediate Egrets**. His notebooks report up to five birds in the Morgan Conservation Park in the month of January, for example in 1977. One bird approached very close had the bare area about the eyes not extending back to the gape or angle of the lower mandible and its neck was about the same length as the body. The birds had yellow bills and dark legs and feet. On 2/2/57 there were four medium-sized egrets there along with several Great Egrets for comparison. In Notebook 4 Erhard reports on a bird he believed to be an Intermediate Egret at the Seepage Lagoon at Cadell on 10<sup>th</sup> January 1959. Its back plumes extended considerably beyond the tail, and there were plumes on the lower neck. The bill was bright yellow, and the legs appeared dark in colour. The tibia had only a short bare area above the knee.

Notebook 3 records a solitary **Little Bittern** among short fairly thin rushes of a lagoon near Morgan on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1954. It eventually settled about 12 ft up on the branch of a river red gum and adopted the typical bittern pose. The bill was yellow, and there was a thin black line down the middle of the throat and chest.

Seven **Australian Spotted Crake** were among lignum in shallow water on a swamp near Morgan on 2<sup>nd</sup> March

1957. One, a female, was secured, constituting a new record for the district.

Erhard recorded the **Golden Plover (now Pacific Golden Plover)** on two occasions on the lagoon near Bryants Creek at Morgan. The first was on 30<sup>th</sup> January 1955, when the bird was in company of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers, which allowed the difference in size and leg length to be observed (Boehm 1955d). The plover exhibited a conspicuous broad, pale eyebrow, fine mottling of buff on the brown shoulders and mantle and a dark-coloured rump and tail. The second record was on 26<sup>th</sup> January 1961 when the bird was with 70 Banded Lapwings.

There were also two observations of **Double-banded Plover**, the first of two birds in company of Sharp-tailed Sandpipers on a marsh near Bryants Creek, Morgan on 2<sup>nd</sup> March 1957. One bird, an immature female, was secured for a study skin. The second record was of a lone individual on a narrow arm of the Seepage Lagoon at Cadell on 2<sup>nd</sup> April 1964. This bird was likewise collected and proved to be a female in eclipse plumage.

In addition the following species not recorded near Morgan were sighted elsewhere along the River Murray: Red-kneed Dotterel (breeding at Cadell, 31/12/62), Common Sandpiper (Cadell, 24/2/62; Cadell, 30/3/66; Cadell, 30/12/71) and Black-winged Stilt (Cadell, 4/1/61).

#### **NON-WATERBIRDS ALONG THE RIVER MURRAY**

While not a waterbird, Erhard's observations of **White-bellied Sea-Eagle** along the River Murray are of interest. Of two birds at Ramco Lagoon on 9<sup>th</sup> October 1954, one bird was an immature. An adult was seen flying over the big lagoon east of Morgan on 19<sup>th</sup> January 1960 and a nest was located 90 feet up in a river red gum 5 miles east of Morgan on 16<sup>th</sup> October 1966. Two large nestlings flushed when L.C. Heinecke climbed below the nest and the younger bird was caught later the same day on a cliff and banded.

Boehm reported several honeyeater and parrot species along the River Murray which have not been included elsewhere so are summarized here: Blue-faced Honeyeater (Morgan, 14/3/41), Little Friarbird (Renmark, 13/12/59; Morgan, 22/12/59; Morgan, 27/1/60), and Regent Parrot (Moorook, 9-11/10/54; Morgan, 24/10/54). He also reports in Notebook 3 that Samuel Sanders of Moorook had seen several Scarlet-chested Parrots in early October 1954, 5-6 miles southwest of Moorook.

#### **Penny Paton**